

Gains noted against child sex abuse

Study finds improvement in state cases

By DEBORAH YETTER
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Kentucky has made significant advances over the past 10 years in how it addresses child sexual abuse, a new study has found.

The investigation of cases, prosecution of offenders, treatment for victims, and resources for victims and their families have advanced significantly from the ineffective and poorly coordinated system of 10 years ago, according to the study.

The findings by Spalding University researcher David Richart will be released today at a Spalding symposium.

"No state has gone so far in such a short period of time," Richart, a longtime youth advocate, said yesterday. "It's got to be one of the overwhelming public policy victories I have seen."

Yet some concerns remain. Perhaps the single most alarming issue for Richart is an increasingly grim state budget forecast that has prompted cuts in human services, including funds to agencies that investigate child sexual abuse and offer treatment, counseling and

other services.

"It's all in jeopardy with the state budget," Richart said. "Future budget cuts are looming clouds on the horizon."

The Cabinet for Families and Children, which investigates allegations of sexual abuse of children, shares that concern, cabinet Secretary Viola Miller said yesterday. So far, the cabinet has lost \$14.8 million in two rounds of recent budget cuts, she said.

"It's like a double whammy for us," Miller said. A shrinking economy means less money for her cabinet to spend on human services, and it increases stresses on families in which parents may lose jobs or be forced to take lower-paying jobs, she said.

"Families are more vulnerable," she said. "There's no question that poverty is directly related to child abuse and neglect."

Miller hailed Richart's findings as good news for the state's efforts overall.

"Improvement is great," she said. "But we all have to hope ... that these improvements will continue."

Dr. Charles Thomas, clinical director of Family Place, a treatment center in Louisville for child sexual abuse victims and their families, agreed.

Child sexual abuse "has a

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profound impact on people's lives," he said. "There are so many people out there who suffered in silence for so long. We've come a long way in the last 10 years, but we still have a long way to go."

Richart said he remains troubled by an overall decline in the number of sexual abuse cases reported to authorities. His study found such reports in Kentucky have dropped 19 percent in the past six years; it said a national study shows a 26 percent decline in reports of alleged sexual abuse.

One theory is that better public education, more aggressive prosecution of offenders and better treatment for incarcerated sex offenders have decreased sexual abuse of children. But Richart said it's possible that overworked and underfunded social service and police agencies may be screening out some reports that are vague or don't seem as egregious.

Richart's study follows a 1991 series in the Lexington Herald-Leader that found major deficiencies in the

system. It reported that many offenders in child-sex-abuse cases weren't prosecuted, others got lenient sentences and few resources existed for victims and their families.

Many officials — including former Attorney General Chris Gorman and Gov. Paul Patton and his wife, Judi — have made the issue a priority, the study said.

As a result, the system today is far different from that of 10 years ago, it said.

Among the study's key findings of progress over the past 10 years:

■ The "most impressive improvement" is the creation of a statewide network of "one-stop" forensic centers where alleged child victims of sexual abuse are examined, interviewed and receive services such as counseling and advocacy. The centers, a centerpiece of the Patton administration's program for child sexual abuse, will be in every region of the state by the end of this year, the study said.

■ More trained professionals are available to treat child sexual abuse

victims, including 20 more physicians and a new cadre of nurses who obtained training as sexual assault nurse examiners under a 1996 law that created that certification.

■ More advocates are available to help child sexual abuse victims and their families, including victim's advocates in 53 of the state's 56 commonwealth's attorneys offices. Ten years ago, only one-fourth of the prosecutors had victims' advocates, who help introduce victims to the court system and prepare them for trial.

■ Courts have become more accommodating to children as witnesses and prosecutors have brought a "new vigor and energy to the prosecution of child sexual abuse," the report said.

Richart's report also listed concerns, such as whether police agencies have enough investigators to handle child sexual abuse cases. It noted both the Kentucky State Police and the Louisville/Jefferson County Crimes Against Children's Unit are short on staff, which may have af-

fected their ability to investigate such cases.

State police are to have a detective and trooper at each post trained to investigate child sexual abuse cases, but staff shortages have detracted from the efforts, the study said.

State police Deputy Commissioner John Lile said yesterday that some of those positions may be vacant, but state police take child-sex-abuse investigations very seriously and "we do have trained people at all posts" to investigate such cases.

Richart's study also said prosecution of child-sex-abuse cases is limited by state Supreme Court rulings that bar most expert testimony in such cases. Experts can provide valuable insight into why children don't always report sexual abuse immediately or why they may, under pressure, recant their testimony.

It said Kentucky is one of only three states that don't allow such testimony. The study recommends the Supreme Court appoint an advisory group to study the issue and recommend whether children have a right to expert testimony at such trials.